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ABSTRACT

Literary artists manipulate language. If educators could develop in their students the same sense that language is manipulable, they could help them to better appreciate literature. Emily Dickinson's poem "I Like to See It Lap the Miles" could be approached by changing it on several levels--graphics, phonics, syntax, and semantics--and seeing how each of these manipulations affects the meaning of the poem. Although this technique does not produce any sort of scientific proof, it does impress upon students the fact that language can be manipulated, and that successful manipulation is not so easy. (Three versions of the poem are included.) (JL)

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Manipulating Language: A Strategy for Teaching Literature.

Prudence P. Byers

My favorite quote on the subject of literature and language is from Anthony Burgess's Enderby's End. Enderby is a big, bloated, dyspeptic Britisher who's teaching at a New York City college. At some point a pompous student says to him, "Poetry is made out of emotions." Enderby replies as follows: "Oh no. Oh very much no. Oh very very much no, and no again. Poetry is made out of words."

We here are clearly on Enderby's side, I think. We believe that students who can be brought to see literature as a species of language will gain in at least two ways. For one, they'll develop a new respect and fondness for their own tongue, having seen what it can do in literature. A lot of students think writing is a conjuring act: some people apparently do it right and others don't, and the difference is a mystery. They don't believe that successful writing is a matter of the selection and arrangement of language materials. They don't really believe that changing a sound pattern here, an association there, a syntactic relation elsewhere, will actually alter the effect of the utterance they--or others--produce. When you demonstrate that their own response to a piece of writing derives from a particular selection and combination of sounds and words and sentences, and would disappear if that arrangement were altered, they're amazed. In this case, you're the conjurer, demonstrating the power that inheres in language and its various properties.

Similarly, the student who disdains literature often does so because he despairs of ever understanding what all the fuss is about. Where others hear rhythms, see images, recognize metaphors and symbols, deduce themes,

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he doesn't. He thinks they're figments in the afficionado's mind. The trick here is to show him that they're in the language, that you didn't make them up. He may not be a whiz at language, but he's on firmer ground there than in the realm of pure sensibility; most of the time he'll be relieved to know that what he thought was too poetic for him to grasp is right there in black and white on the page, where he can see and touch it.

Teaching literature as a way of using language requires that we go one step beyond the questions "What does this mean?" and "How does this make me feel?" to the question "What in the language is making me think or feel this way?" What is in the language of course, is more than just a relation to an external referent. Words don't only have meanings; they have graphological shapes; they have sounds and grammatical forms; they have syntactical and other combinatorial properties that allow them to form larger units--sentences, stanzas, paragraphs, and whole utterances. And these properties make the units of language endlessly manipulable: they can be worked into infinite numbers of shapes and combinations. It's this manipulability that I want to talk about today. There's no question that it's a vital factor for the artist: his vision consists in seeing that a given material can be shaped into a form it hasn't had before. And the ease with which he can shape it (some artists are good at manipulating paint, others are better with musical notes and intervals) and the ease with which it can be shaped (plastic versus marble, for instance), helps determine his medium and what he does with it. In December, Eleanor Berry, a poet friend of mine, was at the MLA touting the word-processor as a tool for writing poetry: she claims that because the computer lets

her more easily manipulate her language--adding, deleting, rearranging, changing rhythms, line-ends, and so on, she does more of it and does it more inventively--in other words, she's a better poet.

The sense that the language is manipulable, then, that you can get in there with your hands and work with it, is characteristic of literary artists--people who like language and can use it profitably; I think it would benefit our students if we could develop the same sense in them. One way we can do this, or try to, is by using manipulation in the classroom as a tool for literary study.

What I mean is this: instead of simply explaining that the poetic effect we're experiencing stems from such-and-such a graphologic or phonologic or grammatical or semantic or discursive feature in the poem, we can try to demonstrate it--usually by eliminating the feature in question and seeing if the effect disappears. Doing this can help teach students what makes a poem recognizable as a poem. You can turn a piece of non-literary prose into "poetry" by writing it in verse-lines, eliminating its syntactic continuity (no therefores), eliminating its syntactic complexity (no subordination), getting rid of predicates and using nominals instead, and so on. Of course you won't produce good poetry, but your students will understand better than they did before that poeticalness inheres largely in language, and that language can be shaped to a purpose--and not only by poets.

Manipulating language can also help teach students what makes a poem good. To illustrate this, I'm going to use Emily Dickinson's "I Like to See it Lap the Miles," a poem more or less about a train. It's Poem A in the attached handout.

Say we start with graphology--how the poem appears on the page. Maybe you--or your students--decide the separate stanzas look like the cars on a train, or that the gaps between them reinforce the stop-and-start, now slow, now fast, movement of a train. Maybe you think lines four and five, "And then, prodigious, step/Around a pile of mountains," are enhanced by the fact that they "step around" a white space the way the train does the mountain. Or you think that in "To fit its ribs,/ And crawl between,/Complaining all the while," the division of lines imitates their meaning, with "And crawl between" literally doing so. Why not test it out? Erase the stanza divisions, combine lines nine and ten and see if there's really a loss.

On the phonological or phonic level, do you think it's important that the rhymes in the poem are approximate instead of exact: "Around a pile of mountains,/And, supercilious, peer/In shanties by the sides of roads;/And then a quarry pare"? Would exact rhymes hold you up too much at the end of each stanza and destroy the sense of movement from one stanza to the next? Have your students put in some exact rhymes and see:

> Around a pile of mountains,
> And, supercilious, peer
> In shanties by the sides of roads;
> And then a quarry shear
>
> To fit its ribs,
> And crawl between,
> Complaining as it will
> In horrid, hooting stanza;
> Then chase itself down hill. . . .

In stanza three, the last one above, is it important that "to fit its ribs" uses short vowels instead of long ones, as if it's trying to suck in its stomach so something can "crawl between"? Or would "to suit

its size," with its long vowels, do just as well?

> And then a quarry pare
> To suit its size,
> And crawl between, ...

Conversely, in that same stanza, would the effect of the lines "Complaining all the while/In horrid, hooting stanza" be the same if the vowels were short? "And grumbling as it will/In hostile, hissing stanza. . . ."?

What if your voice didn't lower in pitch when you say "And chase itself down hill"? Replace "itself" and "downhill" with words more likely to be stressed (more clearly in the class of lexical, open-class items) and see what happens:

> Complaining all the while
> In horrid, hooting stanza,
> Then chase down hill and dale. . . .

When you come to syntax, your class will probably say that it's vital that the poem be one long sentence held together by conjunctions (and) and adverbs (then). Find out; make Dickinson's semi-colons into periods, and make the conjunctions following them into subjects. Poem B, appended to this paper, illustrates what happens when you do this and add exact rhyme too.

Finally, lexis or semantics: is it important to the poem that certain words apply to horses, even though it's not horses but trains that run cross country, hoot horridly, and stick close to shanty towns? Eliminate the horse references, as in Poem C, and see what's left.

These manipulations I'm recommending don't really prove anything, of course: You can't draw firm conclusions from the elimination of one feature, since a change in one inevitably changes others. But that's

part of the lesson. That language can be manipulated is one point. That it's very hard to manipulate successfully is another.

Poem A

I like to see it lap the miles,
And lick the valleys up,
And stop to feed itself at tanks;
And then, prodigious, step

Around a pile of mountains,
And, supercilious, peer
In shanties by the sides of roads;
And then a quarry pare

To fit its ribs,
And crawl between,
Complaining all the while
In horrid, hooting stanza;
Then chase itself down hill

And neigh like Boanerges;
Then, punctual as a star,
Stop--docile and omnipotent
At its own stable door.

Poem B

I like to see it lap the miles,
And lick the valleys up;
It stops to feed itself at tanks,
As real horses sup.

I watch it round the mountains,
And, supercilious, peer
In shanties by the sides of roads,
As if it finds them queer.

It carves through rock,
And crawls between,
Complaining all the while
In horrid, hooting stanza,
Then starts its final mile.

It neighs like Boanerges;
Then punctual as a star,
Stops--docile and omnipotent--
At its own stable bar.

Poem C

I like to see it race for miles,
Across the valley floor,
And stop at a re-fueling tank;
And then, prodigious, steer

Around a pile of mountains,
And, sleek with power, pass
By shanties at the sides of roads;
And then at quarries, part

The wall of rock,
And crawl between,
Producing all the while
A horrid, hooting stanza;
Then race away down hill

With all its engines roaring;
Then, punctual as a star,
Stop--useful yet omnipotent--
At my own station door.